“Hail, Artemisia”: Vestiges of Epic in Gary Snyder’s *Mountains and Rivers Without End*

By Ethan Place

It would seem that most long poems of any merit sooner or later get accused of being epics.

Among the works captured within the epic genre’s prodigious gravitational field are of course the oral compositions of Homer (the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*), literary poems in the style of Homer (the *Aeneid*, *Paradise Lost*), and various ethnic or nationalist compositions containing elements generally associated with epic narrative, often melded with warrior or chivalric traditions (*Beowulf*, *The Cid*, the *Kalevala*, the *Song of the Nibelungs*, the *Song of Roland*, the *Tain*, the *Song of Igor’s Campaign*, the *Elder Edda*).

Also “epic” in a broader sense are the long Renaissance poems that combine epic-style narrative and romance (*Orlando Innamorato*, *Orlando Furioso*, *Jerusalem Delivered*) as well as the many mock epics, parodies, and ironic turns on the epic tradition (*Mac Flecknoe*, *The Dunciad*, *The Rape of the Lock*, *Don Juan*, Joyce’s *Ulysses*). Some long religious poems outside the western epic tradition have also frequently been termed epics (*Gilgamesh*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, even *The Bible*).

Gary Snyder’s *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, with its Buddhist underpinnings and personal perspective, is antithetical to the martial themes and heroic posturing of the traditional epic. And there is certainly no attempt by Snyder to appropriate much of the heroic apparatus of the Homeric epics and their imitators: no elaborate descriptions of battles, feasts, games, and armaments; no poetic “high style” with its convoluted metaphors, repeated epithets, and digression-laden speeches. Nor does Snyder’s poem contain much in the way of national or ethnic identity-building, though it does map out a mythic terrain of epic proportions stretching from the Great Basin to the Orient and the Mid-East.

However, Snyder’s poem, if we can consider it a unified work as well as a collection of shorter verses, does have the overall scope of an epic. It takes in 40 years of time, twice the interval cover by the *Odyssey*. It encompasses a wide expanse of numinous territory — both geographical and cerebral — within its formal thematic structure. (In terms of structure, the Chinese painting is used much like the Brooklyn Bridge in Crane’s modern epic poem *The Bridge*, functioning as both a controlling metaphor and as a kind of figurative palimpsest upon which the poem itself is inscribed.) Snyder’s poem also
chronicles a journey of transformation that is characteristic of the “interior” aspects of the epic tradition going back through Dante to Gilgamesh.

Following are a few observations about possible vestiges or echoes of the epic tradition in Mountains and Rivers Without End:

**In Medias Res**

Probably owing to their oral, semi-improvisational origins, epics generally begin “in the middle of things.” Thus, with the opening phrase “clearing the mind and sliding in/ to that created space,” Snyder simultaneously enters into the Chinese landscape painting “Endless Streams and Mountains,” into the materia of his own poem, and, implicitly, into the spirit of Dogen’s “The Mountains and Rivers Sutra,” from which the poem takes its name. At the same time, Snyder evokes the endless or circular quality of nature itself, the landscape that never stays the same. He is in fact starting in the middle of all things, as every artificer must.

Snyder in his essay “The Politics of Ethnopoetics,” declares that “Homer...is not the beginning of a tradition but at the midpoint in a tradition. Homer incorporates and organizes the prior eight thousand years of oral material... [and] launches those images again forward for another couple of thousand years...” Just as an epic exists within the skein of legends, stories, and narratives that make up the identity of a people, Snyder as poet is “walking on walking,” passing through an unfolding vista, following a colophonic path daubed on the scroll of space and time by his predecessors.

**Invocation**

One prominent element of the classical epic and its descendants is an invocation to a muse or goddess. The poet calls upon this deity for literary inspiration, becoming a sort of divine mouthpiece or Aeolian harp. In Milton’s epics the goddess is replaced by the Holy Ghost, but the inspirational impulse is similar.

Mountains and Rivers Without End invokes just such a muse in the poem “Earrings Dangling and Miles of Desert.” The object of Snyder’s invocation is Artemisia, the sagebrush, and by extension the huntress goddess Artemis, to whom wormwood is sacred: “She loves to hunt/ in the shadows of mountains/ and in the wind —” The invocation is quite specific at the end of the poem:

_Hail, Artemisia_  
_ aromatic in the rain,  
_ I will think of you in my other poems._

The botanical Artemisia has certain properties that render it suitable for invocation, foremost among them universality. Apart from growing in profusion in the Great Basin, varieties of the plant are distributed widely around the world (“worldwide — thirty species in Japan alone”), making Artemisia a sort of omnipresent _genius loci_ or spirit of place (“she’s always there”). In addition, the plant has helped sustain humans and animals in various ways “for tens of thousands of years.” And there is also a nod to _Artemisia absinthium_ or wormwood, the intoxicant in absinthe. (As a testament to the
literary pedigree of this drink, both absinthe and Artemisia get entries in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature.*

But beyond that, Artemisia is for Snyder one manifestation of a multiform divine spirit, what in his essay “Goddess of Mountains and Rivers” he calls “a great goddess: spirit of the valley, mother of ten thousand things, marvelous emptiness before being and nonbeing.” In the ancient “muse-magic” tradition, this female or yin spirit, whom Snyder also associates with Gaia the earth goddess as well as the female Buddha Tara, helps the artist “demonstrate and celebrate ... interconnectedness.” Snyder’s essay, originally the foreword to Edward Schaffer’s book *The Divine Woman: Dragon Ladies and Rain Maidens in T’ang Literature,* goes on to identify this spirit with the earth’s water cycle, which in Chinese poetry is represented by the rain maidens. At the end of “Earrings Dangling,” the “raincloud maidens” are lyrically twined with Artemisia, “aromatic in the rain.”

There is also a possibly muse-oriented lexical connection in Snyder’s etymology of the word “artemisia” in the poem: Artem in Greek meant “to dangle” or “earring.”

(Well-connected, “articulate,” art...)

The words in parentheses form a chain of associations starting with the notion of “well-connected” conveyed by dangling earrings (presumably descriptive of the plant itself) and proceeding to “articulate,” which can mean “to join or form a joint” as well as “endowed with the power of speech” or “to give words to.” The final link in the associative chain is the word “art” with its burden of aesthetic connotations, followed by ellipses suggesting an infinite continuation of the lexical series.

**Catalogs**

Another key element in classical epics is the catalog. Homer’s catalog of ships in the *Iliad* is perhaps the epitome of this device, a way of introducing the forces arrayed against Troy while also defining relationships and increasing dramatic emphasis. In Snyder’s work, the catalog or inventory is primarily used as a mechanism for inclusiveness and interconnectedness, yoking the cataloged items together and imbuing the whole with incantatory power.

Whether it’s animals in an ecosystem, forms of water, the detritus of civilization in California’s Central Valley, the contents of Old Woodrat’s stinky house, or the names of places encountered on a journey, Snyder’s catalogs chart the lyric landscape like coordinates plotted randomly on a sort of universal or spiritual Cartesian graph. Encompassing by means of particularizing, Snyder gives the impression of processing or condensing experience without ostensibly organizing it. This brings to mind the “chaotic universe where everything is in place” that he finds in the “Steams and Mountains” painting, with a special emphasis on “everything” and “in place” — the *genius loci* interpenetrated by the *spiritus mundi.* As one of the annotators on the painted scroll observes, “The Fashioner of Things/ has no original intentions/ Mountains and rivers/ are spirit, condensed.”
(Mock-)Heroic Challenges

In epics of the martial variety, heroic combatants often deliver challenges in which they establish their identity and hurl invective at their adversary. These exchanges often seem to last quite a bit longer than the fights themselves. Here’s an example from the Irish epic *Tain Bo Cuailnge*:

Ferdia: What brings you here, Squinter,
to try my strength?
Through the steam of your horses
I’ll reach and redden you.
You’ll regret you came.
You’re a fire without fuel.
You need plenty of help
if you ever see home.

Cuchulainn: Like a great boar
before his herd,
I’ll overwhelm you
before these armies.
I’ll push you and punish you
to the last of your skill,
and then bring down
havoc on your head!

Ferdia: It is I who will kill,
I who will destroy,
...and so on

The exchange between McCool and Moorehead in “Bubb’s Creek Haircut” (“Go to hell”; “Kiss my ass”) is antitheroic not only because of its brevity and plain language, but also because it’s delivered by proxy. The two men are in different parts of the Sierra, ensuring that the good-natured jibes couldn’t possibly provoke so much as a love tap. Instead of, say, the “heavy pine-tree spear” with which Aeneas kills Turnus, we have McCool and his trail crew “in a scraggly grove of creekside lodgepole pine” and Moorehead’s crew nine day’s walk away “in the drizzly pine/ cussing and slapping bugs.”

And we have McCool’s name, recalling the hero Finn Mac Cool (Fionn mac Cumhail) of the Irish Fenian cycle, chronicled by James Macpherson in his “translation” *Fingal: An Ancient Epic*. As a youth, Finn Mac Cool was supposedly educated in a forest by a poet.

The struggle in this poem is obviously not between warriors, but between the back country crews and the elements, a struggle that ultimately yields “purity of the mountains and goodwills.” The haircut is an ironic ritual that prepares the poet for his trial in the mountains, with his old green hat serving as a talisman that attracts a ride on the highway, but only mosquitoes in the wilderness.
To the Underworld

From *Gilgamesh* and the Orphic myths through the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, and *The Divine Comedy* on down to Joyce’s *Ulysses*, a descent into the nether regions symbolizes the hero’s quest for knowledge and self-discovery within the context of ancestral history and looming mortality. The central figure is generally accompanied by a guide with certain spiritual or sibylline credentials.

“Journeys” is an allegorical narrative that takes Snyder on a quest through a succession of symbolic landscapes — more like dreamscapes — with “a map of our route in mind” that “became increasingly complex.” The guide is at first a woman with attributes of Eve, then finally the master Ko-san.

At one point the poet comes to “the LOWLANDS,” a place of “underground building chambers clogged with refuse,” dark except for “one tiny light bulb.” And “locked inside is hell,” with the word “inside” italicized. There is a sort of perpetual movie theatre here with men wandering “in shreds” like shades in Hades, together with a succession of grotesque, shit-filled latrines. Rather than a territory of discovery and enlightenment, or an oracular cave where secrets are revealed, the LOWLANDS is the netherworld as a combination of Platonic Cave, existential Inferno, and excremental waiting room complete with hat rack. Interestingly there’s no hint of a guide at this juncture, probably because there’s not need, since “we all head in here somewhere” in any case.

Having escaped or transcended this spiritual low point, the poet does eventually acquire another guide in the person of Ko-san, who leads him in sight of a true “world after death.” This scene, which takes place on a precipice in the mountains, conveys a sense of elevation, clarity, and mindfulness that is in sharp contrast to the “humid, clouded level world” of the LOWLANDS.

When Ko-san grabs the poet and pulls him over the cliff, his “death” and revival recalls Snyder’s account of the Coyote legends in his essay “The Incredible Survival of Coyote.” Snyder notes that “Coyote never dies; he gets killed plenty of times, he comes back to life again, and he goes right on traveling.” In one story Coyote falls to his death while traversing two worlds, dies, and is resurrected one piece at a time from objects in the natural world. Then he moves on. Similarly, at the end of “Journeys” the poet dies after falling to the bottom of the gorge, leaves his body, and then starts drifting up the canyon, presumably on a stream or river. The last line is a quotation with no identified speaker: “This is the way to the back country.”

The phrase “back country” here is emblematic of the terrestrial/mental/spiritual place of mountains and rivers, “the foolish loving spaces full of heart” as Snyder puts it in “Finding the Space in the Heart.” Place is important. Snyder writes in the “Coyote” essay that “Coyote was interesting to me and my colleagues because he spoke to us of place, and became almost a guardian, a protector spirit. The trickster image is basic; it has to do with turning heroes into a joke...” Snyder points out that “for years the literature of the West [referring to both the American West and the Occidental West] was concerned with
exploitation and expansion. This is what we mean when we talk about the ‘epic’ or ‘heroic’ period — a time of rapid expansion, of first-phase exploitation. This literature is not a literature of place.”

Further, in “Unnatural Writing,” Snyder lists among his points for a new nature poetics the necessity of being “grounded in a place,” as well as the use of Coyote as a totem who can provide “the eye of other beings going in and out of death, laughing with the dark side.” To Snyder, Native American lore such as the Coyote stories represents the full scope of human experience on the continent, tapping into the repository of power and inspiration residing in the natural world (and natural language) of the “back country,” as opposed to the deracinated and thanatotic world of the Westernized “LOWLANDS.”

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So is Mountains and Rivers Without End in fact “an epic”? When asked this question, Snyder replied, “Now I’m wondering what the hell it is.” In his essay on the making of the poem, he calls it “a sort of sutra — an extended poetic, philosophic, and mythic narrative of the female Buddha Tara.”

Perhaps it’s enough to say the poem lives in the landscape of the epic tradition, brushstrokes on a venerable scroll.

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